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AUTHOR Pezzulich, Evelyn
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ABSTRACT

Writing teachers are currently faced with another paradigm shift. Some 25 years ago, a fledgling field of composition studies advocated the switch from a traditional product view to a process view of teaching writing. Recently, new studies and books are emerging which critique this view as insufficient. The pragmatic view of writing instruction uses the process view as its foundation and builds on it by increasing the emphasis on the social aspects of writing. It also advances a whole-language approach to teaching. In conjunction with this paradigm shift, several other pedagogical movements are afoot, including becoming aware of cultural diversity both within the literary canon and the classroom. Yet another issue concerns whether literary text should be used in the composition classroom. Inclusion of literary texts in the classroom that model the move from silence toward language, especially by marginalized characters, are important in promoting a liberal education that seeks to empower similarly silenced and marginalized students. (Contains six references.) (CR)

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Diversity in the Canon and the Composition Class:

Rethinking the Role of Literature in the Writing Classroom

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Evelyn Pezzulich

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Diversity in the Canon and the Composition Class:

Rethinking the Role of Literature in the Writing Classroom

It appears that as writing teachers we are currently faced with another paradigm shift. When I first began teaching in the early seventies, some twenty-five years ago, it was a fledgling field of composition studies that advocated the switch from a traditional product view to a process view of teaching writing. Recently, new studies and books are emerging which, while not throwing out process, critique this view as insufficient, attempting to complete it with what is termed the pragmatic view of writing instruction. As James D. Williams explains in his book, Preparing to Teach Writing, published in 1996,

> The pragmatic view of writing instruction, then, uses the process view as its foundation and builds on it by increasing the emphasis on the social aspects of writing. It advocates the position that written discourse, like oral discourse, is highly functional. The implication for instruction is that every task be related to the "real world." In practical terms, a real-world emphasis means that students' compositions will do something in the tangible sense of performing a social action.

> The pragmatic view also advances a whole-language approach to teaching: Reading, speaking, listening, and writing are interrelated activities in the classroom. In this respect, the pragmatic view is inherently psychosocial. At the present time, the pragmatic view appears to be the next step forward in theory and pedagogy.[1]

In the pragmatic view of writing instruction, the process approach is faulted for overly stressing the psychological, interior processes of writers and inadequately focusing on the social contexts which influence them and in which they find themselves. It seeks to redress these problems by offering a more balanced view. According to Williams, the pragmatic view aims both "to link literacy with the daily activities of students so that reading and writing become more meaningful to them"[2] and "to help students discover an effective means to...learn how to define themselves through language."[3]

In conjunction with this paradigm shift in the teaching of writing, several other pedagogical movements are afoot, not the least of which is the emphasis on becoming aware of cultural diversity both within the literary canon and the classroom. Shaped partly by a changing student body which increasingly includes non-traditional students, that is older women and minority students, this emphasis on diversity has led to nationwide debate over whether or not the canon is being destroyed by the inclusion of female and minority authors or invigorated by a breath of new life.

Yet another issue, which connects writing and literature, is whether or not literary texts should be used in the composition classroom. For example, on the grounds that the freshman courses, Writing I and Writing II, are service courses for the entire academic community, literature can no longer be taught in Writing II at the four year state college

where I teach, having been replaced by argumentative essays and a focus on the research paper. This policy has been in effect for a number of years now not only at my particular institution but at others across the nation.

In light of these recent changes, I believe we need to rethink the role of literature in the writing classroom, hence the title of this paper. For many composition students voice, which is so central to the composing process, is a baffling concept, especially as they do not perceive themselves as writers. Finding an authentic voice is even more difficult for women and culturally diverse students who are part of an often hostile, dominant culture which works to silence its least powerful members. Yet, this discovery of voice is what often allows people to speak autonomously, think independently, and, therefore, take authentic moral action—aims that are central to a liberal education. For these reasons, the inclusion of literary texts in the classroom that model the move from silence towards language, especially by marginalized characters, are important in promoting a liberal education that seeks to empower similarly silenced and marginalized students.

Two such texts that speak powerfully to both the issues of voice and diversity are Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Color Purple, and Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Both works begin with an injunction to silence. Walker's novel opens with a transcription of the warning words Celie's stepfather spoke to her concerning their illicit relationship, "You better not never tell nobody but God"[4] while Kingston's narrator is similarly chided by her mother, "You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you."[5] Both women, although appearing very different with Celie being a rural Afro-American and Kingston's

narrator an urban Chinese-American, are similar in that their tales are about a search for voice and, thus, identity. Both women achieve this in telling their stories, Celie through writing her letters and Kingston's narrator through becoming the woman warrior, the writer who gets her revenge through reporting.

The reader first meets Celie, Walker's protagonist, as a young woman who is so profoundly isolated that her only form of communication is through letters to an audience she makes up, namely God. Believed to be the victim of incest and warned by her supposed father to keep quiet, Celie already at the age of fourteen has been effectively silenced. Except for her sister, Nettie, the only person who has ever loved Celie and, in fact, the one who taught her how to read, she exists as an object to be used or bartered rather than as a person. She is essentially parentless, both motherless and sold off in a loveless marriage to Mr. by a "father" who now finds her an inconvenience after bearing his two children. When Celie is eventually torn from her sister by her vengeful husband, her isolation is complete. Celie's conflict becomes whether to suffer in silence as an observer of life or to discover her own voice and her capacity for active choice as an autonomous human being. Walker's novel, then, is about Celie refusing to remain a commodity in a society that sees her as little else. It is about her entrance into selfhood, about loving and discovering that she is lovable and, thus, worthy of self-respect and the respect of others. It is this transformation of Celie that is not only recorded but also fostered by the letters that she writes, first to God and later to her sister, Nettie.

Celie can begin to move towards selfhood only after she meets Mr.'s old flame, the glamorous blues singer Shug Avery, who was based in part on the writer, Zora Neale Hurston. Shug is uniquely herself—an authentic individual who revels in her artistic self-

expression and lives her life as she pleases, free of influences from the male dominated society in which she finds herself. Although her real name is Lillie, as Celie explains in one of her letters to God, "She just so sweet they call her Shug."[6] Her real name and its symbolism is telling. Shug is innocent in her sexuality because it comes out of a love of life and of herself and of God. The title of Walker's novel is derived from Shug's theology of both an imminent and omnipresent benign life force that wants everything to be loved and everything to flourish: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."[7] This is the antithesis of Celie's theology of God as an old white man who demands a passive acceptance of suffering: "Well, sometime Mr.—git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways."[8] Despite her emerging sexuality, occasioned by her lesbian relationship with Shug, it is this passive acceptance as well as her fear that keeps her from going off with Shug when the first opportunity presents itself to escape her downtrodden existence with Mr.

It is only after Shug returns a second time and, by chance, discovers that Mr. has been hiding letters from Nettie addressed to Celie these many years that Celie can reach a turning point. It is her anger at Mr. for depriving her of the one thing that has kept her going—the belief that one day she would receive a letter from her sister, Nettie—that finally catapults her out of her habitual passivity. It is also Shug's nurturance, which Celie has otherwise lacked, that has allowed Celie to see herself differently—as someone worthy of love and respect and, therefore, entitled to fight to preserve her integrity as a human being. And after reading the discovered letters, it is also Nettie, who has become a missionary in Africa, who fosters Celie's emerging selfhood as the latter gains more self-

respect from Nettie's experiences in Africa and a greater knowledge of her cultural heritage. Celie now has the moral courage to leave Mr. and escape to Memphis with Shug when her second chance arrives. "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation."[9] It is in a new place, in Memphis, that Celie finds herself and becomes part of creation by becoming a creator—in this case an artisan of pants. As the critic, Nancy Walker, points out, it is at this time that, unlike her earlier letters which went unsigned because she felt she was no one, Celie can sign a letter to Nettie with both a name and a place.[10]

In writing her letters, first to God and then to her sister Nettie, Nancy Walker goes on to remark that Celie changes from being passive and silenced to becoming "the novelist of her own life."[11] In doing this, she not only finds herself but her own voice and language—a dialect she refuses to give up. Near the end of the novel when Darlene, a friend, tries to teach Celie how to talk "properly," Celie writes Nettie: "Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down....Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind."[12] Having been almost banned in Oakland, California because a mother objected to the language of the novel, Alice Walker in her essay, "Coming in From the Cold," defended her decision to let Celie tell her story in her own voice feeling that to speak in the language of her oppressor would have been to "deny her the validity of her existence."[13]

The novel ends, then, with Celie as creator, in a theology of creation. Through her letter writing and sewing, Celie has been able to give birth to her authentic self. She has

come to be both seen and heard versus remaining "invisible and silent" in a culture that, like Mr. until his own transformation near the end of the novel, could only see Celie in terms of her physical and economic status. As the critic, Elizabeth Fifer, points out: "Language gives Celie the power to affirm her own existence, to announce herself to the world: 'I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly...a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here."[14] It is through the very act of writing, then, that Celie comes to grasp and grapple with her situation in order to eventually transcend and transform it. It is this that Fifer means when she goes on to say, "In The Color Purple, Walker's narrative techniques realize and embody this primary truth; how we tell the stories of our lives determines the significance and outcome of the narratives that are our lives."[15]

This could not be more true of the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior. Like Alice Walker's text, Kingston's novel is also about a search for identity, in this case what it means to be Chinese American and female. Through five overlapping stories that can stand alone but that also enrich each other, the narrator traces her struggle to find her voice and identity, especially through the agency of language. The critic, Suzanne Juhasz, delineates the series of conflicts that complicate the narrator's search for self: "...The Woman Warrior is about trying to be an American, when you are the child of Chinese emigrants; trying to be a woman, when you have been taught that men are all that matters; trying to be a writer, when you have been afraid to speak out loud at all."[16]

All of these conflicts come to a crisis in the very last story of Kingston's novel, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." In it, the narrator examines her childhood: "When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent....The

other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl."[17] Caught between two cultures, between her Chinese upbringing and American school customs, Kingston's narrator says that she did not even know she was supposed to speak up at school or assert herself although, eventually, she and most of the other Chinese girls did learn to speak up, if only softly and haltingly, in order to survive. Like the younger Celie who cannot leave Mr. because of her own low self-worth, in the sixth grade Kingston's narrator, out of her own self-loathing, cruelly abuses a young Chinese girl who refuses to speak. Fearing she might end up like this silent girl, the narrator screams at her: "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality....You've got to let people know you have a personality and a brain."[18]

This conflict between home and school continues for the narrator as she earns straight A's, which go unnoticed at home, and plans to attend college while her parents begin answering ads of young men looking for wives in their local Chinese newspaper. When she believes they plan to marry her to a mentally deficient boy who kept following her at Chinese school, the conflict that has been intensifying for years becomes too great:

> ...I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat....One night when...the whole family was eating dinner...my throat burst open....I looked directly at my mother and at my father and screamed, "I want you to tell that hulk, that gorilla-ape, to go away and never bother us again....I'm going away....I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded....Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts say about me? They tell me I'm smart, and I can win

> scholarships. I can get into colleges. I've already applied. I'm smart....I can make a living and take care of myself."[19]

When the daughter is able to talk back, she is able to assert her independence from her mother and from her Chinese cultural heritage which devalues women. Without totally rejecting either, Kingston's narrator finally is able to speak and claim her voice and identity as a Chinese American woman. And in real life, Kingston becomes the woman warrior, the poet, who takes vengeance with words against all those misogynist sayings of her parents and culture such as "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds," and "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls."[20]

The critical importance of language, both oral and written, in both texts is emphasized by Nancy Walker when she states,

> In The Color Purple and The Woman Warrior...the central characters are initially silenced by their cultures, but each eventually works her way to freedom through language. The central irony in...[these] texts is that the very thing that is denied these women—the freedom to speak up, speak out, be heard—becomes the medium through which they define themselves. Celie's letters to God and Nettie [and] the woman warrior's memoirs...serve as records of an emergence from silence, both in terms of the way in which they relate to others and in the fact of the written record itself.[21]

For these characters, then, it is language even more than action, and especially in written form, that leads to their development as authentic human beings.

I believe it is just these types of characters that can model the move from silence to language through the written word for the similarly marginalized students who show up, increasingly, in our composition classes. These texts address not only the power of the written word to transform the writer and society but also issues of gender and cultural diversity that are problematic for subordinate classes trying to achieve within a dominant culture that often works to suppress them. Celie's letters or the woman warrior's memoirs could not be better illustrations of the pragmatic view of teaching writing in their power not only to effect personal transformation but social transformation as well. For both individuals, their writing was highly functional, a lifeline to their real selves and to the "real world," so to speak. As for banishing literature from the composition classroom to make way for argumentation, the composition specialist, James D. Williams, argues that "almost all writing is inherently argumentative owing to its rhetorical nature. Poetry and narrative fiction, for example, can be seen as representations of reality that a writer wants an audience to accept. The intentional component makes the writer's representation argumentative."[22] Finally, teaching such texts, far from diminishing the literary canon, illustrates in all their complexity how the acquisition of voice and language is central to the aims of a liberal education, that is autonomous speech, independent thought, and authentic individuation.

Notes

[1] James D. Williams, Preparing to Teach Writing (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996), 11-12.

[2] Ibid., 11.

[3] Ibid., 195.

[4] Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Pocket, 1982), 1.

[5] Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior (New York: Vintage, 1976), 3.

[6] A. Walker, 126.

[7] Ibid., 203.

[8] Ibid., 44.

[9] Ibid., 207.

[10] Nancy Walker, Feminist Alternatives (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 62.

[11] Ibid., 63.

[12] A. Walker, 222-23.

[13] Donna Haisty Winchell, Alice Walker (New York: Twayne, 1992), 87.

[14] Elizabeth Fifer, "The Dialect and Letters of The Color Purple," in Contemporary American Women, eds. Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 159.

[15] Ibid., 165.

[16] N. Walker, 66-67.

[17] Kingston, 165-66.

[18] Ibid., 180.

[19] Ibid., 197-201.

[20] Ibid., 46.

[21] N. Walker, 60-61.

[22] Williams, 236.

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